



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Regional Office, 9721 Executive Center Drive N., St. Petersburg, FL 33702

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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Fishery Management Plan for Pelagic Sargassum Habitat of the South Atlantic Region Available for Public Review and Comment

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) has submitted the subject Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for review, approval, and implementation by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries). If implemented through subsequent rulemaking, the FMP would:

- establish the management unit for Sargassum and stock status criteria for that management unit;
- designate essential fish habitat (EFH) and EFH habitat areas of particular concern (EFH-HAPC) for Sargassum; and
- establish harvesting restrictions for Sargassum taken in or from the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off the southern Atlantic states.

NOAA Fisheries is requesting comments from the public regarding the FMP. Written comments must be received on or before **June 16, 2003**. Comments received after that date will not be considered by NOAA Fisheries in their decisions regarding the approval of the FMP. See the **Addresses** section at the end of this bulletin for information on when and how to submit comments.

Background Information

Sargassum is an abundant brown algae that occurs near the surface in warm waters of the western North Atlantic. Most Sargassum drifts between 20° N and 40° N latitudes and 30° W longitude and the western edge of the Gulf Stream. The static standing crop of Sargassum is estimated to be 4 to 11 million metric

tons (mt) or roughly 9 to 24 billion pounds. Sargassum supports a diverse assemblage of marine organisms, including over 100 species of fish, fungi, micro- and macro-epiphytes, at least 145 species of invertebrates, five species of sea turtles, and numerous marine birds.

Floating mats or rafts of Sargassum represent a highly renewable natural resource that can be harvested or fished. From this standpoint, the harvest or take of this natural resource could be managed under a fishery management plan. Additionally, these mats or rafts of Sargassum vegetation provide habitat and protection for numerous marine species. Recognizing the importance of Sargassum as habitat, the SAFMC previously designated Sargassum as EFH and as EFH-HAPC for snapper-grouper species and coastal migratory pelagic (mackerel) species.

The SAFMC is concerned about the impacts of commercial harvest of this important resource. Over a 22-year period (1976-1997), 203.2 mt (448,000 pounds) of Sargassum were harvested off the southern Atlantic states. To best protect this important marine resource, the SAFMC has developed this FMP to manage Sargassum as a fishery resource and to conserve this resource as EFH off the U.S. Atlantic coast from the North Carolina/Virginia boundary through the east coast of Florida, including the Atlantic side of the Florida Keys.

All comments received will be considered by NOAA Fisheries in its decision to approve, disapprove, or partially approve the FMP. All comments received by NOAA Fisheries on the FMP will be addressed in any final rule that is published to implement the actions

proposed in the FMP.

Addresses

Requests for copies of the FMP should be sent to:

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
One Southpark Circle, Suite 306
Charleston, SC 29407-4699
Phone: 843-571-4366; Fax: 843-769-4520
e-mail: safmc@safmc.net

Comments on the FMP, which includes an Environmental Impact Statement, an Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, a Regulatory Impact Review, a Social Impact Assessment, and a Fishery Impact Statement must be mailed to:

Steve Branstetter, Ph.D.
NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office
9721 Executive Center Drive N.
St. Petersburg, FL 33702

Comments may also be sent via fax to 727-570-5583. Comments will not be accepted if submitted via e-mail or Internet.

Dates

Written comments must be received on or before **June 16, 2003**. Comments received after that date will not be considered by NOAA Fisheries in their decisions regarding the approval of the FMP.

To obtain considerable recorded information about our missions, services, and management measures, call our toll free public service line at 1-866-570-5301. If the information you need is not available, leave a message, and we will return your call. This and other news releases are available on the Southeast Regional Office homepage at <http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov/>. NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Department of Commerce.